

Problems Facing the Deep-Sea Fishing Industry in Sri Lanka

By

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Fishing in Sri Lanka has been carried on largely with the use of traditional methods and in recent years there has been a marked increase in the use of mechanized craft for fishing. Although some effort has been made in the sphere of deep-sea fishing both by trawlers and long line tuna boats, such efforts have not made a significant contribution towards improving the industry. The progress of deep-sea fishing in Sri Lanka has been hindered due to a number of reasons. They are :

1. Lack of Capital

A large initial outlay of capital is required for acquiring a fleet of fully equipped deep-sea fishing boats. Neither the private sector nor the Government is in a position to invest such a large sum of money for the purchase of trawlers and long line tuna boats, which are now very expensive. Fishing boats today cost about 100 percent more than what they were a few years ago.

2. Gear and Equipment

For the successful operation of deep-sea fishing boats, a ready supply of fishing gear and equipment is required. Due to a number of factors such as import restrictions and lack of foreign exchange and inability of producing such gear and equipment locally, there is a shortage of these material for the fishing industry.

A fleet of deep sea fishing boats cannot be kept idle for want of fishing gear. An industry with a large capital outlay cannot afford idle capacity least of all fishing boats. When the fishing boats are tied up in the harbour, awaiting supply of gear, the investor has to incur expenses such as interest, crew wages, salaries and expenses of officers as well as harbour dues where they could have been profitably engaged in fishing operations. One essential requirement for the operation of deep-sea fishing will be ready supply of all required gear and equipment.

3. Repair Facilities

The non-availability of suitable slipways and dry docking facilities is another draw back to the deep-sea fishing industry in Sri Lanka. The fishing boats have to be bottom cleaned and painted periodically to keep them in operating order. The correct type of marine antifouling paint that has to be used on the ships hulls is also not available. The same applies to repair facilities. The required spares are not readily available. Spares for the engines as well as equipment are not stocked by the respective agents and have to be obtained by the ships owners. There is a considerable loss of fishing days due to ships having to wait for repairs for want of these essential spares. As stated earlier, fishing boats cannot afford to lose working days idling in the harbour.

4. Trained Personnel

Sri Lanka does not possess qualified and trained Captains, Master Fishermen and Engineers to operate a fleet of deep-sea fishing boats. Such qualified persons will have to be recruited from abroad.

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5. Fishing Grounds

The continental shelf around Sri Lanka is very narrow and change in depth beyond certain range are very abrupt. No effort has been made to survey and chart the seas around Sri Lanka. It has been left to the fishing industry to survey and clear the fishing grounds. In contrast the Indian Government with the assistance of international agencies have surveyed and cleared the fishing grounds as far back as 1948. Whereas in Sri Lanka, these operations have to be performed by the operators of deep-sea fishing vessels. In addition to the capital outlay on trawlers, equipment and gear, the fishing industry has to incur additional costs in fishing days lost and damage to nets and gear, in clearing fishing grounds of vegetative growth and debris.

6. Trawling

The only two known grounds for trawling around Sri Lanka are the Wadge Bank and Pedro Bank. Of these two, the Pedro Bank has a better variety of fish but trawling is made difficult due to the rough bottom in this fishing ground. The variety of fish in the Wadge Bank is not so good and is also a very narrow bank which we have to accede to India under the territorial limits. It would therefore be seen that future for trawling operations in Sri Lanka are very limited.

7. Mid-Water Trawling

As an alternative to bottom trawling, we could engage profitably in midwater trawling. However midwater trawling, where pelagic varieties of fish that move in shoals are caught, is a very highly technical operation. The shoals of fish have to be spotted and nets drawn at the correct depth against the path in which the shoals are moving in order to net the fish. A very special type of electronic equipment and highly qualified and trained personnel to operate the nets are required in this type of fishing. The trawlers engaged in bottom trawling cannot be used for midwater trawling and special type of stern trawlers geared for midwater trawling have to be obtained.

8. Purse Seining

Pelagic variety of fish could also be caught by purse seining. Purse seining is carried out for the capture of shoals of fish such as tuna, bonito and skipjack. Here again special type of boats are required which have to be fast moving and also to be operated by highly skilled and experienced officers. The capture of pelagic varieties of fish by purse seining or midwater trawling ensures the fish being hauled on board in very good condition as the fish die on deck and not in the sea. Successful operation of purse seiners depends on the ability of detecting shoals of fish and depending on the size of the shoals a catch of 50-80 tons in one haul is not uncommon. The advantage in this type of fishing is that it does not require cleaning of the sea floor or availability of depth charts. The fishing boats could ascertain the depth from their depth sounders. By the use of electronic fish finders, the exact depth of an direction of movements of shoals of fish could be accurately ascertained. The fishing gear for the operation of purse seine, will be very expensive as nets are upto one mile long and about 50 fathoms in width and appropriate weights, floats, weight lines and float lines have to be used.

9. Long Line Fishing

Tuna long line fishing has been carried out to a very limited extent in Sri Lanka. This method of fishing is very expensive as considerable amount of consumable supplies are required. The baits, hook wire, glass floats and hooks have to be imported and about 15-20% of the hook wire, glass floats and hooks are damaged on each trip and have to be replaced.

Another factor that has made long line fishing expensive is that the hooking ratio has declined in recent years. In this type of fishing the long line extending 30 to 35 miles are laid with 300 batches which is normal for each operation by one ship. These lines are held afloat by glass floats some of which are lit. Each long line with 300 batches has 2,000 branch lines and each branch line has to have a bait which is normally a mackerel pike attached to the hook. Although 2,000 baited hooks are laid, the hooking ratio have declined to a great extent as a result of which the catches of tuna have been very poor and their unit cost very high. Another problem encountered in long line fishing is that the tuna which have been caught are attacked and consumed by sharks and whales. The quality of the fish captured by long line fishing is also not very good as the fish die in the sea and by the time they are hauled on board, deterioration has already set in.

10. Recommendations

In order to overcome all these problems that are faced by the deep-sea fishing industry in Sri Lanka we could expand our activities in order to provide very much needed fish protein at reasonable prices to the population of Sri Lanka with foreign collaboration. For the minimum requirements of fish protein for the nation, we would require a catch of 750 tons of wet fish per day.

Part of this fish is to be distributed in the wet form and part in the form of dried fish. The traditional methods of fishing and mechanized boats cannot even meet a fraction of the demand for wet and dried fish in the country. The adoption of the 200 miles economic zone by Sri Lanka makes it imperative that we should harvest the resources of the seas around us for the benefit of the population. We lack capital, equipment, vessels, technical personnel and know-how to exploit these resources in full by ourselves. In these circumstances, the best method for reaping benefits for our country from the seas around us, is to invite foreign participation. All the coastal countries have extended their territorial limits to a 200 mile economic zone. As a result of this, there are many fishing boats in very good condition lying idle in the major fishing countries. Qualified and trained officers to operate these vessels are also available in these countries for employment. We could negotiate and obtain the services of the fishing boats as well as the qualified personnel on very favourable terms from these countries. Without incurring heavy foreign exchange outlays in capital and other connected matters, we could develop our deep sea fishing industry and produce more fish at very reasonable prices by entering into joint ventures with advanced fishing countries.

In this context, I wish to quote from the Report of the 11th Session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries held in Rome, 19-26 April, 1977, on the Role of Joint Ventures in Fishery Development :—

“In addition, the relevant provisions of the text now being discussed before the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea would require coastal states to give to other states access to the surplus, of the allowable catch in its exclusive economic zone, which it does not have the capacity to catch on its own. The arrangements envisaged for granting such access include joint venturing. The conclusion should be that while many, perhaps most, individual joint ventures will be transitional arrangements, joint venture as a strategy is likely to be valid for some long time, and some individual ventures may be of indefinite duration.”

DISCUSSION

It transpired that sufficient incentives were not offered by Government to attract foreign collaborators for the establishment of such ventures. It was also indicated that fisheries was not an industry tied up with the proposed Free Trade Zone.

The Secretary indicated that the Ministry had obtained assistance from FAO for planning its policy in joint ventures. Already certain incentives were available for foreign participation. He further welcomed suggestions regarding further incentives for establishing joint ventures. The Secretary mentioned that the proposed activities in the Free Trade Zone was still in the planning stages and that he could see no reason why fisheries should be excluded as an industry in this zone.

Comments on such topics as the use of dry ice in the fishing industry, the need to meet the requirements of the local fish consumer before export, exploitation of our labour and youth by joint venture fishing operations, mismanagement of foreign exchange allocations, management of infrastructure, resources, personnel, finances and marketing were also discussed.